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E.O. 12065 GDS 1-5-85 (HARRIS, F ALLEN) OR-P
TAGS SHUM, AR
SUBJECT POLICE "CLOSE" PLAZA DE MAYO TO STOP MOTHERS DEMONSTRATION

REF: 1978 BUENOS AIRES 10053

SUMMARY: (U) FEDERAL POLICE "CLOSED" THE PLAZA DE MAYO ON JANUARY 4, 1979 TO PREVENT THE MOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO FROM HOLDING THEIR USUAL THURSDAY DEMONSTRATION. POLICE ACTION WAS PROBABLY TRIGGERED BY THE SIZE AND ANIMOSITY OF RECENT DEMONSTRATIONS. SIX OR SEVEN DEMONSTRATORS WERE ARRESTED, INCLUDING A 90 YEAR OLD UNITED STATES CITIZEN SEEKING INFORMATION ON HIS GRANDDAUGHTER. END SUMMARY.

1. (7) THE ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT ACTED ON JANUARY 4 TO STOP THE REGULAR THURSDAY MOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO DEMONSTRATION. ON RECENT THURSDAY REPORTEDLY OVER A THOUSAND MOTHERS AND FAMILY MEMBERS OF THE "DESAPARECIDOS" HAVE BEEN GATHERING IN THE PLAZA BEFORE THE CASA ROSADA WHICH HOUSES BOTH THE PRESIDENCY AND THE

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MINISTRY OF INTERIOR. DURING THE PREVIOUS TWO THURSDAY DEMONSTRATIONS (DECEMBER 21 AND 28) SECURITY OFFICIALS FROM THE CASA ROSADA AND THE FEDERAL POLICE HAD PROMISED THE MOTHERS THAT THEY WOULD PROVIDE INFORMATION REGARDING THE DISAPPEAREDS (SEE REFTEL). THIS UNDERSTANDABLY RAISED ENORMOUS EXPECTATIONS AMONG THE MOTHERS. THE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS' PROMISES LED TO AN INCREASE IN THE SIZE AND A CHANGE IN THE MOTHERS BEHAVIOR. ON THE PREVIOUS TWO THURSDAYS, THE MOTHERS ABANDONED THEIR SILENT VIGIL PRACTICE AND BEGAN SINGING THE NATIONAL ANTHEM AND CHANTING "TELL US WHERE THEY ARE" (NOW DIGAN, DONDE ESTAN) AS THEY CIRCLED THROUGH THE TWO SQUARE BLOCKS OF THE PLAZA.

2. (U) ON JANUARY 4, WHEN THE MOTHERS ARRIVED HOPING FOR A REPLY FROM THE GOVERNMENT, THEY FOUND THE PLAZA FILLED WITH SEVERAL HUNDRED UNIFORMED FEDERAL POLICEMEN ARMED WITH RIFLES AND MACHINEGUNS. THE SURROUNDING STREETS STAKED OUT WITH SCORES OF PLAIN-CLOTHESMEN AND THE FEDERAL POLICE'S "FUERZA DE CHOQUE" STANDING BY IN ARMORED ASSAULT VEHICLES. THE TOWN'S CATHEDRAL, WHICH FRONTS ON THE PLAZA, HAD BEEN LOCKED BY A PRIEST JUST BEFORE THE DEMONSTRATION. THIS WAS ESPECIALLY EMBITTERING TO THE MOTHERS AS A SYMBOL OF CHURCH INDIFFERENCE. THE POLICE

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ALLOWED PEDESTRIANS TO CROSS THROUGH THE PLAZA, BUT DID NOT PERMIT ANYONE TO STOP. THOSE MOTHERS WHO LOITERED WERE WARNED TO MOVE ON. SIX OR SEVEN WERE ARRESTED.

3. (U) AMONG THOSE TAKEN WAS JULIUS WILLIAM ROBSON, A 90 YEAR OLD AMERICAN CITIZEN. MR. ROBSON'S GRAND GAUGHTER, MARIA NOGUER DE VILLAGRA, DISAPPEARED WITH

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HER TWO MONTH OLD BABY FROM A BUS STOP IN A BUENOS AIRES SUBURB IN JUNE, 1976. MR. ROBSON HAS BEEN A REGULAR DEMONSTRATOR IN THE PLAZA AND HAS WRITTEN SEVERAL STRONG LETTERS ON THE DISAPPEARANCE ISSUE TO THE BUENOS AIRES HERALD. MR ROBSON WAS TAKEN TO PRECINCT NO 2 AND RELEASED QUICKLY DUE TO CONSIDERATION OF HIS ADVANCED AGE. THE OTHER DEMONSTRATORS WERE REPORTEDLY STILL IN POLICE CUSTODY LATE ON THE AFTERNOON OF JANUARY 5TH.

4. (C) EMBASSY COMMENT: POLICE ACTION AGAINST THE MOTHERS' THURSDAY DEMONSTRATION HAD BEEN RUMORED FOR SEVERAL WEEKS. IN THE PAST THE GOVERNMENT HAS TOLERATED THE MOTHERS' DEMONSTRATIONS AS LONG AS THEY WERE KEPT RELATIVELY SMALL--BETWEEN 100 AND 200 PEOPLE. IN NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER 1977 AND AGAIN IN RECENT WEEKS, THE THURSDAY DEMONSTRATIONS BECAME LARGE--OVER A THOUSAND DEMONSTRATORS WERE REPORTED TO BE IN THE PLAZA ON THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28TH. THIS APPARENTLY TRIGGERED THE GOVERNMENT'S ACTION. IN PREVIOUS ACTIONS THE GOVERNMENT ARRESTED 300 MOTHERS IN NOVEMBER 1977, "AND "DISAPPEARED" THE GROUPS LEADER SHIP IN DECEMBER 1977 AND NOW THE GOVERNMENT HAS ADOPTED A NEW TACTIC OF CLOSING THE PLAZA TO THE MOTHERS.

5. THIS WILL CERTAINLY BE EFFECTIVE IN THE SHORT RUN AS THE MOTHERS' GROUP HAS NO FORMAL ORGANIZATION AND THEIR MAIN CONTACT WITH EACH OTHER IS AT THE THURSDAY DEMONSTRATIONS. HOWEVER, WE DOUBT THAT THE MOTHERS CAN BE DISSUADED PERMANENTLY FROM PRESSURING THE GOVERNMENT. WE EXPECT THE MOTHERS WILL SHORTLY FIND OTHER AVENUES OF EXPRESSION THROUGH MEMORIAL MASSES, ETC. THE GOVERNMENT'S RECENT ACTION IS BUT ANOTHER ATTEMPT TO TREAT THE SYMPTOMS RATHER THAN CURE THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THE THOUSANDS OF ARGENTINE DISAPPEARANCES.

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END COMMENT.
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